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**THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE**

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

DDI #5781-82  
13 July 1982

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

VIA : Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM : MG Edward B. Atkeson, USA  
National Intelligence Officer for  
General Purpose Forces

SUBJECT : Brief Military Assessment of Iraq/Iran Situation

1. Once again Iranian forces are launching attacks on their Iraqi foe. Early press reports indicate that they may have advanced as much as five miles into Iraqi territory. The Iranians enjoy marked advantages over their opponents at this juncture, principally because of:

- Better leadership at higher operational levels;
- Higher morale and (while defending their homeland) a clearer sense of mission;
- Better adaptation of their force structure to available supplies;
- A solid record of having defeated their enemy in all important engagements for the last year.

It should be noted that these advantages are largely intangibles which, while of great importance, may be offset to some degree by more tangible disadvantages of time, space and force ratios as the Iranians advance into Iraq.

2. Iraq appears anxious to bring the war to a close, but Iranian terms thus far have been too bitter a pill for Baghdad to swallow. Iranian objectives include:

- The fall of the Saddam Hussein regime;
- Infliction of punishment upon Iraq and extraction of reparations for its initial invasion;

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- Settlement of the Shatt-Al-Arab waterway dispute in Iran's favor;
- Destabilization of the Iraqi state through stimulation of internal Shia rebellion in the southeast region.

None of these objectives necessarily requires occupation of any specific terrain. However, it appears unlikely that the Iranians could expect much success with the last one without seizing and holding significant areas in southern Iraq.

3. Iraq and Iran share a border of over one thousand kilometers in length, but much of it is impassable or otherwise unsuitable for large scale conventional military operations (see Map A). The principal axes of advance, which have been used by both sides during the war, are:

- Qasr-e-Shirin - Baghdad. This would be the most likely route of advance for a modern army attacking Iraq from the east with the objective of seizing the capital city. It runs astride the main Tehran-Baghdad highway, traversing the Zagros Mountains just to the east of the border. It is basically a one-way street from a military point of view because of the difficult passages through the mountains. On the west, however, it is level and has a rail line running from Baghdad to Khanaqin, within a few kilometers of the border. The Iraqis originally attacked along this axis to secure the route against possible Iranian counterattack.
- Dezful-Al Amarah. This sector has seen some of the heaviest fighting of the war. It lies to the north of the great marshlands that tend to canalize movement in the southeast part of Iraq. On the Iranian side it affords access to the oil and gas fields of the upper Karun valley. On the Iraqi side it leads to crossing sites over the Tigris River and to a principal highway running from Baghdad to Al Basrah in the south.
- Khorramshahr-Al Basrah. Both Iraq and Iran presently have their heaviest troop concentrations in this sector. This is the principal scene of current action. The terrain is flat and relatively solid on both sides of the border. The Iraqis have constructed earthworks and dug in some seven divisions in the vicinity of the border. Significantly, however, they have left a weak stretch of the frontier. Behind the Iraqi lines are extensive swamps and canal networks which could inhibit an orderly Iraqi withdrawal should they

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suffer a reverse in their present positions. The Iraqi force is probably opposed by the equivalent of five Iranian divisions, but the Iranian strength is enhanced by sizeable numbers of militia infantry.

4. Besides the principal rivers, the swampy nature of the terrain and the many streams and small canals in southeast Iraq are the principal natural features influencing tactical movement. The high water season has just passed, and the entire drainage system is presently in regression. The principal rivers are substantial barriers to east-west movement year around, but in the area south of Al Amarah the Tigris narrows to less than 200 feet in width, affording relatively easier crossing at that point. The key Shatt-Al-Arab runs over 500 feet in width and some 30 feet in depth at this time of year. As the flow of water in both the Tigris and Euphrates diminishes in coming weeks much of the land around Al Basrah will begin to dry out, and cross-country trafficability will improve.

5. Map B depicts the southern front around Al Basrah. Possible Iranian invasion routes through gaps in Iraqi fortifications are indicated by arrows. Should the Iranians be successful in breaching Iraqi defenses on the north bank of the Shatt-Al-Arab, they could seize the crossing sites opposite Al Basrah, threatening the security of all Iraqi forces on that side of the waterway. The swampy and restricted nature of the terrain to the west would greatly complicate the withdrawal of remaining Iraqi forces.

6. Such an envelopment would bring Iranian forces within easy artillery range of Al Basrah and pose the threat of crossing the river, seizure of the city, and potentially a maneuver southward forcing closure of all Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf. It is less than 50 km from Al Basrah to the Kuwaiti border. The great swamplands north of the area would restrict attempts by the Iraqis to counterattack the Iranian flank to narrow routes paralleling the Tigris and Euphrates river courses. These routes might be effectively blocked by relatively small Iranian forces, particularly if they were to receive support from the Shia populace. As the dry season advances, maneuver room will increase (through October), but important barriers will remain.

7. The likelihood of an Iranian advance on Baghdad is much less acute. Iranian forces have limited mobility and the distances involved in an attack on the capital from the south are considerable, exceeding 400 kilometers as the crow flies. An attack from the northeast, along the Qasr-e-Shirin-Baghdad avenue of advance, would be possible, but it would require extensive realignment of forces and a buildup of an adequate

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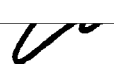
logistical base in the north. Barring internal political collapse, the Iraqi capital is in little immediate danger from the Iranians.

8. The Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in central Iraq are also potential objectives of an Iranian offensive. Like Baghdad, however, they lie a long way from the natural access routes from Iran into Iraq and are north and west of the marshlands. Should the Iranians decide to press ahead they might opt for a sweep west of the Euphrates to take advantage of the more trafficable country in the desert. While, again like Baghdad, the cities could fall victim to internal collapse, from a tactical point of view they are "a bridge too far" for Iranian reach in the near term.

9. Should the Iranians manage to break through the Iraqi defenses and choose to press toward the Kuwaiti border, there is little that would inhibit their extending their operations to seize the Kuwaiti capital. The terrain is very suitable for high speed advance. Total Kuwaiti armed forces number less than 13,000 and the Saudis barely 52,000 (including air and naval forces of 14,500 and 2,200 respectively). Only a threat of outside intervention (e.g., by the US) may deter such a thrust. The Pakistani Brigade destined for Saudi Arabia has not yet been deployed. If the situation develops as suggested above, the Saudis may consider stationing the brigade on their east coast rather than at Tobuk in the west.

10. The immediate outlook for Iraq is bleak. There is little likelihood of substantial reinforcement from other Arab states because of the negative attitude of Syria toward the Baghdad regime and the preoccupation of many states with events in Lebanon. Tehran probably perceives that it has an opportunity to settle old scores with Iraq, and perhaps with Kuwait as well. At worst, Iranian revolutionary fever could catch hold among Iraq's Shia population, giving rise to a possible separation of the southern part of the country under Iranian protection (see Map C). The Iranians have found that success breeds success; the degree of success which the Iranians achieve in their offensive could bring about changes in the map of the Persian Gulf littoral for years to come.

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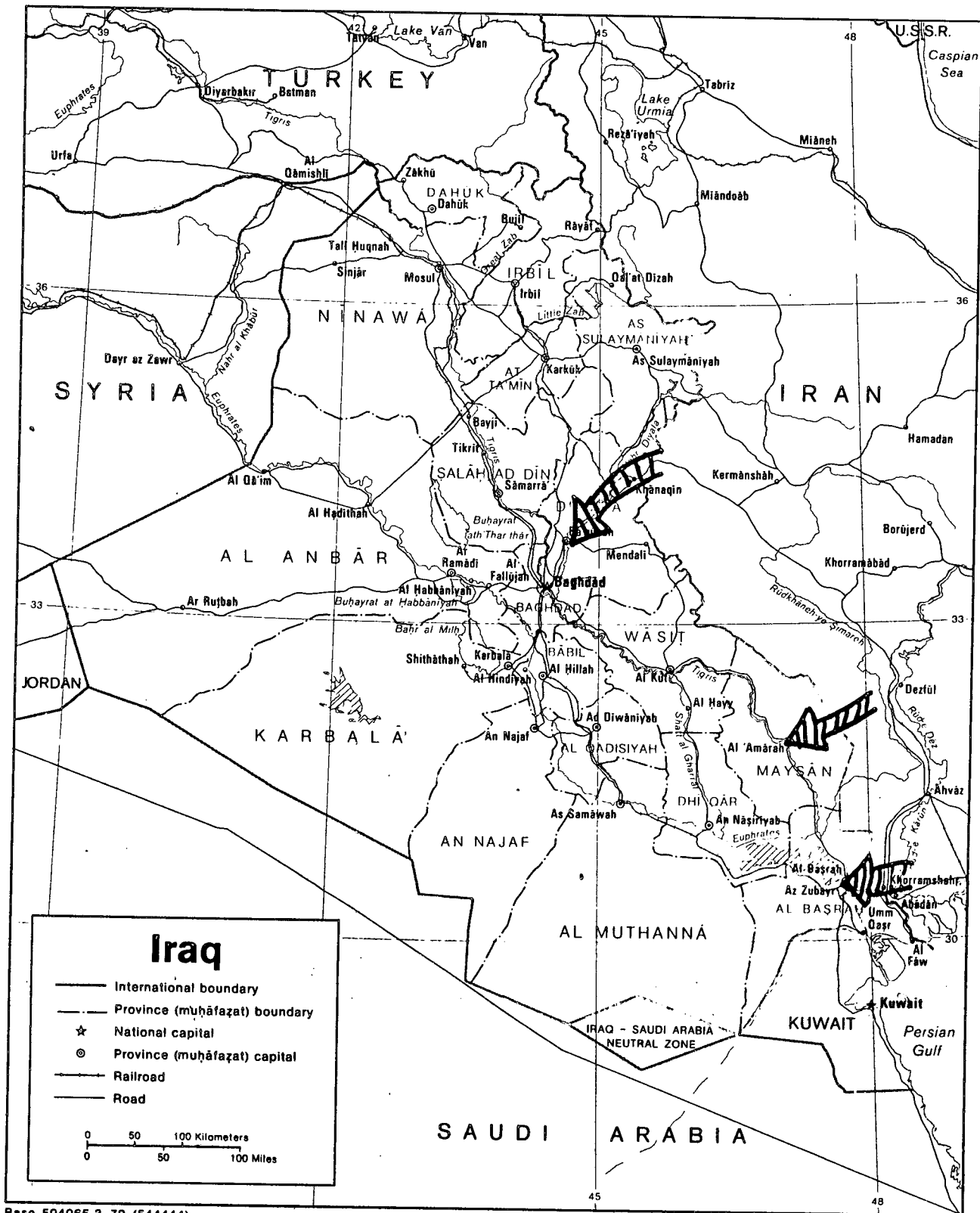
 Edward B. Atkeson

## Attachments:

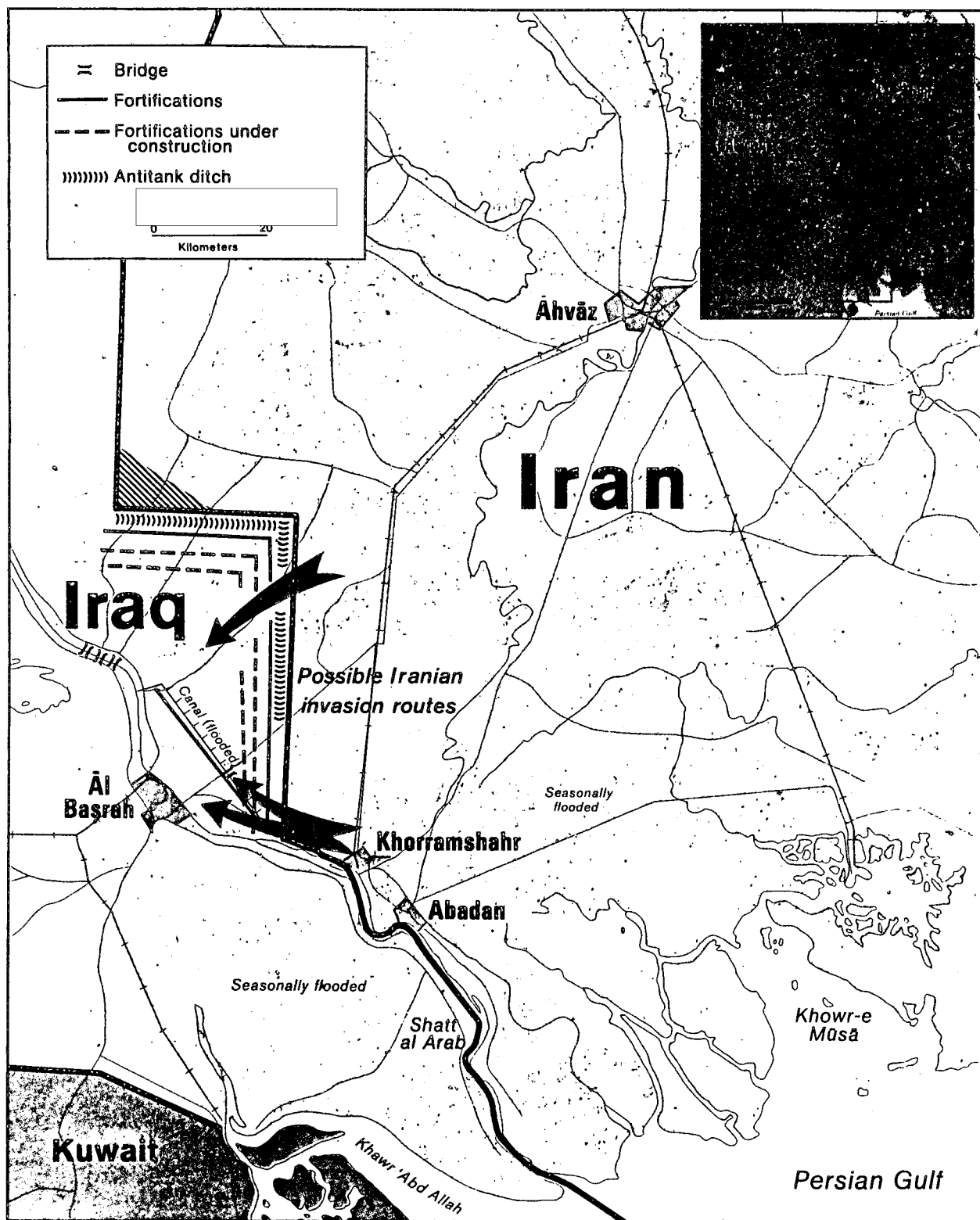
Map A  
Map B  
Map C

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Brief Military Assessment of Iraq/Iran Situation - Map A



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Brief Military Assessment of Iraq/Iran Situation - Map B



## Distribution of Religious and Ethnic Groups

### MAJORITY GROUPS

- Sunni Arab
- Sunni Kurd
- Shia Arab
- Sunni Arab and Sunni Kurd
- Sunni Arab and Shia Arab

### MINORITY GROUPS

- Yezidi
- Turkoman
- Iranian
- Christian
- Mandaean
- Jewish

Christians represent different sects and ethnic groups.

Yezidis, Mandaeans, and Jews, although shown as religious groups, may also be considered as separate ethnic entities.

0 200 Kilometers  
0 200 Statute miles